

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter will examine the importance of developing the helping relationship and those skills needed to develop a positive working relationship between the Children's Service Worker and the family member.

The Primacy of Relationship

Strong Children's Service Worker-family relationships are primary to the process of treating dysfunctional families in their own homes. The intensity of service and the workers' presence in the home make possible a much closer working relationship with the family than in traditional service systems.

The positive in-home helping relationship has many dimensions:

- A spirit of friendship that is facilitated by the Children's Service Worker's willingness to work with the family on their "turf";
- The family's experience of really being believed in, often for the first time. Educational research has shown that the expectations of the helper are a prime determinant of behavior. Family-Centered workers find that this principle operates in family settings as well;
- Providing support when the going is tough. Sometimes simply living through an experience with the family is the most helpful thing one can do;
- Stimulating hope, often the necessary first step in developing the motivation to change.
- The families referred for Family-Centered Service tend to be those for whom developing relationships is the most difficult. Because of their many negative experiences, they often have developed an understandable mistrust of authority, institutions and so-called "helping" professionals. But, even though developing relationships is not to be considered an end in itself, all else hinges on a positive working relationship.

Developing the Helping Relationship

A positive working relationship with the family members can be developed by the Children's Service Worker;

- Being readily available to the family;
- Interacting with them in a relaxed and natural manner;
- Showing genuine concern and really listening;

- Recognizing each member as an individual;
- Being honest; and
- Being willing to reach out and make extra efforts for the family.

In turn, the family members can learn to trust the Children's Service Worker and experience a relationship that is consistent, predictable and reliable. They can feel cared about as individuals. Through their relationship with the worker, the family can find someone that they can depend on. This may decrease the parents' need to depend upon their children in unhealthy and inappropriate ways, and demonstrate responsible adult behavior to the children.

Stages of the Helping Relationship

After the initial stage of relationship development, many helping relationships pass through four additional stages:

- Transition Period. During this stage of the relationship, parents are learning to trust the Children's Service Worker and may begin to test the relationship through difficult and unproductive forms of behavior. Anger and frustration may be freed and vented and the parent may even be hostile to the helper. If the parent tests the relationship in this way, it is important for the worker to set limits and focus on helping the parent learn how to begin changing behavior patterns to ones that are appropriate;
- Partial Dependency. As parents learn that they are valued in spite of their difficult behavior or hostility, they may be ready to begin self-acceptance and self-nurture. This is also a time to concentrate on learning new parenting patterns and problem solving;
- Independence. The goal of the nurturing and re-parenting relationship is to improve self-esteem enough so that the parents can cope constructively with crisis situations, can use others in times of extreme stress, and can enjoy being with their children and use appropriate parenting and child-management techniques. The Children's Service Worker should respond to the parent's strong need to have positive growth and change recognized;
- Termination. The termination process is crucial. Children's Service Workers should work with their supervisors to plan and carry out the termination phase. Generally, the procedure for terminating should include:
 - Preparing for withdrawal through open discussions;
 - Gradually decreasing contact between Children's Service Worker and parent;

- Helping the parent develop other supports if this has not begun earlier in the relationship;
- Continuing to recognize and highlight positive changes;
- Being sure that parents have someone they trust with whom contacts can be maintained after termination;
- Either continuing permission to contact the Children's Service Worker or by contacting an alternative friend and advocate;
- Children's Service Workers should not be surprised if the parent experiences a sudden "failing" during the termination process. It is often a normal phenomenon and should not ordinarily be permitted to forestall termination.

Developing Alternative Support Systems

Family-centered programs emphasize the need to help family members develop their own support systems which will remain in place after services are terminated. The Children's Service Worker should be planning toward the family's eventual independence from the onset of service. The possible sources of alternative support are as varied as the circumstances of the family and its members:

- Community organizations;
- Religious organizations;
- Groups at neighborhood centers;
- Parenting classes;
- Groups organized around special interests (athletics, gardening, CB radios, etc.);
- The extended family (though resolution of relationships with members of the extended family may be necessary before their involvement can be constructive);
- One-to-one relationships with volunteers recruited and supported by Children's Service Workers for special purposes;
- Support groups for persons with similar problems, such as:
 - Parents Anonymous;
 - Parents Without Partners;

- Alcoholics Anonymous;
- Al-Anon family groups;
- Alateens; and
- Weight control groups. (These can be very supportive, and some maintain a policy of waiving membership fees for low income members.)

Program Support Groups

Many family-centered programs which serve multi-problem, socially isolated parents eventually develop their own support groups to meet client needs which cannot be met by the Children's Service Workers alone.

- **Mother's Groups**

Socialization: Generally the most important purpose of a mother's club is to provide opportunities for mothers to get away from the children for a time, to emphasize the mother's separateness and need for adult friendship and to make her the center of attention. In a semi-safe atmosphere, accompanied by the Children's Service Worker, she may learn to develop and maintain other relationships. Gathering for coffee, festive Christmas parties, picnics and other events are memorable occasions for workers and families alike.

Group Counseling: In group settings, parents may realize that their problems are not unique and that others are facing and coping with similar problems. Skills such as assertiveness and problem-solving, which have been learned in the counseling relationship, may be practiced in the group setting. In general, mother's club meetings give clients a chance to experience themselves in a new and different light.

Education: The agency may use the group meetings to provide a structured educational component. Club members often participate with Children's Service Workers in planning topics and activities of interest, such as how infants and children learn, parents' role in teaching children, dealing with homework, sex education and family planning, family health and safety issues, abused women, inexpensive crafts and hobbies, using community resources, and preparing inexpensive, but nutritious meals.

- **Youth Groups**

Mother's clubs are often organized to fill a vacuum in a community's existing organizational life. Such vacuums may also exist for adolescents who do not participate in the cultural or social mainstream of their communities.

Example: A family-centered agency serving an affluent farming community became aware that many of the families of adolescents referred for status offenses or delinquent behavior shared a common cultural environment. Living in small, makeshift homes on the banks of a local river, these "river people" were largely excluded from the organizational life of the school and community.

Children's Service Workers who counseled these families in their homes became aware of their special interests and talents. Existing organizations (school and 4-H clubs) neither recognized nor nurtured their exceptional strengths in hunting, forest and wildlife survival skills. Children's Service Workers organized a 4-H group which offered a channel for recognition of the skills which were important in their sub-culture. A boxing club was also formed by a volunteer worker.

- Self-Help Networks

Agencies have used their community organizers or resource coordinators to compile resource files of neighborhood residents with special skills that other clients can use. For instance, a family having difficulty with the Department of Social Services could be put in touch with a neighbor who knows the ins and outs of the welfare system.

- Parent Workshops

Agencies have organized workshops which use a parenting curriculum developed for high-risk families. The workshops meet for two hours per week for a period of eight weeks. While the opportunity to socialize with other parents is a by-product of these workshops, the essential purpose is to help parents understand themselves and their children better. Participation in such workshops can be used to document parents' efforts and progress for Children's Service Workers and the court. (Providing both child care and transportation is often essential to gaining the parents' participation).

Source: This chapter was adapted from Placement Prevention and Family Reunification: A Handbook for the Family-Centered Service Practitioner, authored by June C. Lloyd and Marvin E. Bryce with assistance from LaVonne Schulze, published by The National Resource Center on Family Based Services, Revised 1984, Chapter 8, "The Nurturing and Re-parenting Role."

MEMORANDA HISTORY: